

Rim towns lag behind in wildland fire codes

By [Alexis Bechman](#)

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Andy Towle/Roundup

Ray Bizal, regional manager for the National Fire Protection Association, cited statistics that show wildfires are getting worse every year with population growth and environmental changes.

Despite Payson and Star Valley sitting in the middle of a ponderosa pine forest at high risk for a devastating forest fire, both communities lag behind in adopting a set of wildland fire codes, says the Arizona State Forester.

Other at-risk communities, like Flagstaff and Prescott, adopted a set of wildland urban interface (WUI) fire codes several years ago. These codes prevent homeowners from building with wood shingles, and mandate a defensible space around an entire property.

Raging wildland fires like the 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire "will surely come" again, but local agencies and homeowners can take steps now to lessen their costs and damage, fire officials said Thursday at a fire code forum.

Some 1,800 wildland fires break out in Arizona every year and last year destroyed 900 structures, that make fire a major concern, especially in communities like Payson that are surrounded by ponderosa pines. The Rodeo-Chediski Fire burned a half-million acres. In 2003, the Aspen Fire scorched 84,750 acres and the Willow Fire in 2002 charred 19,500 acres.

"Wildfires are getting worse every year with population growth and environmental changes," said Ray Bizal, National Fire Protection Association western regional manager.

Since 2000, 3.5 percent of Arizona's land area has burned in a wildfire, said Vicki Christiansen, Arizona State Forester. The state pays between \$3 and \$20 million annually in fire suppression costs.

"We are ripe for a catastrophic wildfire," she said.

Christiansen, along with several other foresters, recommended fire departments in the Rim Country adopt the wildland urban interface (WUI) fire codes, like five other Arizona communities have, to minimize property loss and damage from future fires.

Once set in place by a town council, WUI fire codes are a set of rules builders of new construction must follow.

The codes call for the use of fire-resistant materials, give specific building specifications, such as for chimneys and flues, and provide criteria for creating a "defensible space" around structures.

The code also allows fire departments to legally enforce the restrictions. Currently, fire departments like Hellsgate can suggest a homeowner create a 30-foot defensible space around a home, but cannot impose it.

Phil Mele, Arizona State Fire Marshal, said fire codes are based on knowledge gained from the tragic realities of past fires. A fire code can save lives and property, especially in the unique environment of the wildland urban interface.

"If we can be smart enough to sit down and talk in advance of what will surely come, the cost will be much less of what we would spend," he said.

Hellsgate Fire Chief Gary Hatch said the fire department proposed adopting the WUI codes nearly 10 years ago. Officials and home owners who feared the code would restrict landscaping, quickly turned down the idea.

"People don't like to be told what to do, so we have taken the approach of asking them to voluntarily do it," Hatch said.

"We ask you to do it, not tell you," Hellsgate Battalion Chief Doug Blazer said of the firewise program.

Hatch said he would like to see WUI codes adopted for the area, but it should be done on a county level to create a uniform code.

Currently, five towns in Arizona have adopted the WUI code. Flagstaff adopted it in February 2008 after several devastating wildfires.

"Unnatural fuel accumulations, exacerbated by insects, disease and drought, have resulted in an alarming increase in both the size and severity of wildfires," the Flagstaff Fire Department official said. "Societal demands and resulting management practices during the past century have created a forest that is now severely overcrowded."

Realizing the severity of the situation, Flagstaff adopted the code citywide. As a result, the fire department began thinning overgrown areas and required homeowners to create a defensible space around their homes.

Prescott also adopted the code in May 2002 after the Indian Fire. During that fire, five homes were lost and 1,365 acres burned, said Eric Kriwer, Prescott Fire Marshall.

With more communities adopting WUI codes, Christiansen said Arizona is restoring forest health.

"Local communities are key to implementing WUI Fire Codes that can mitigate wildfire risks," she said. "We are going to continue to see more wildfires because fire knows no boundaries. As more people move out to the natural environment, the important thing is to help them help themselves."

Christiansen encouraged Rim Country communities to continue with the firewise program and consider creating a voluntary code.

Ron Williams, executive director of the Arizona Insurance Council, said that property and casualty insurers in the state support expanding WUI fire codes.

"When we can reduce losses and save lives and homes by adopting reasonable, proven standards, we, as insurers, can be more competitive, and that benefits policyholders in many ways."

Ways to protect your home from wildfire

- Keep 100 feet of garden hose attached to home
- Keep chimney clean
- Keep a woodpile at least 30 feet from a home or fuel tank
- Landscape with rock next to structures
- Remove all but scattered trees within 30 feet of structures and for the next 70 feet, thin and prune trees and shrubs
- Screen under decks and enclose soffits

Source: Arizona Interagency Coordinating Group